

# Causes and Consequences of the “Failure” of the GDR Central Round Table (Dec. 1990- Feb. 1990)

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The conveners have asked us to reflect on the significance of the round table format, given its role in the history of a particular round table during the momentous political changes of 1989/90. My response to the question as applied to the Central Round Table of the GDR is twofold. On one hand, I wish to give credit to the Central Round Table which is often seen as not having fulfilled its aspirations. Given the particular structural context in which the round table was operating, it was remarkably successful and achieved more than could have been anticipated given its weak legitimacy and power base, in particular, providing a sense of stability and moral guidance in tumultuous times. On the other hand, my thesis is that it was unable to exert a major influence on what was to follow, neither in the short-term or long-term. In particular, – and in marked contrast to the situation in Hungary and Poland – what happened at the round table left hardly any trace in the collective memory of Eastern and Western Germans.

There seems to be remarkably little scholarly literature on the GDR round table. The main works are by [Uwe Thaysen](#) who was an observer at the round table who edited a [multi-volume verbatim record](#) of its meetings (Reviewed [here](#)). Of particular interest of the readers of this blog are the contributions by [Ulrich K. Preuß](#), who had been asked to serve as a consultant for the constitutional sub-committee. He has published about [his experience](#) and about the implications of what happened for constitutional theory ([here](#) and [here](#)).

Comments from round table participants such as [this one](#) from the social-democratic delegate in the constitutional sub-committee often convey a strong sense of disappointment that the recommendations of the round table were not heeded after the new elections. In particular, it was felt that it was wrong that the newly elected Parliament of the GDR rejected outright the draft of a new constitution for the GDR, which the round table had adopted at the last session of the round table in February 1990. But the situation in early spring 1990 was very different from when the round table started two months earlier, and the revolutionary legitimacy that it initially enjoyed had faded away in the meantime.

Let's quickly review the chain of world-historical events that led to these elections. The GDR round table is unthinkable without the developments in Poland and Hungary. The Polish round table between the government and the opposition met from February to April 1989, and the Hungarian, from March to September. The model was therefore well established when the regime of the SED hardliners started to unravel. In early summer, opposition activists were able to prove that the local elections had been manipulated. The summer was dominated by West German

TV coverage of GDR citizens crossing the now open border from Hungary into Austria and climbing over the walls of the West German embassies in Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw. October sees the pompous 40th anniversary of the GDR anniversary with the visit of the Soviet leader Gorbachev who made clear that he was not going to back the hardliners in the GDR government. The turning point came shortly afterwards, when peaceful mass demonstrations in Leipzig were not bloodily suppressed in a “Chinese solution.” Mid-October already, Erich Honecker resigned as General Secretary. However, the old regime was not able to regain the initiative, for at least three reasons: First, it was completely discredited and could not present any new credible personnel. Second, on November 9<sup>th</sup>, the wall fell, and there were no more obstacles for GDR citizens to migrate to West Germany, where they could apply for immediate citizenship. Finally, at the end of November, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced a plan for a confederation of the two German states, with the eventual aim of a reunification. In the eyes of a large majority of the population, the prospect of a swift political and economic integration into the prosperous western German state made any alternative option of an independent, but impoverished GDR unattractive.

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, the first meeting of the GDR Central Round Table was held. It had 15 members from the government, 15 members of the opposition and help public, televised sessions, operating on a consensus principle. It established subcommittees working on broad range of topics, one of which was tasked to produce the draft of a new constitution. In contrast to the Polish and Hungarian round tables, where the results of a future election were quite uncertain, government and opposition did not meet to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement in the coming democratic regime. The GDR was already in dissolution, and even though the government was still in control of the machinery of state, it was no longer able to use this machinery to keep itself in power. The demonstrations on the street were generally peaceful, but threatened to turn chaotic (think of the [storming of the Stasi headquarters](#)). The members of the round table reported that given the economic situation, the continuous loss of workforce, and a combination of rising dissatisfaction and loss of control, there was a palpable sense of collapse, even civil war. In this situation, the round table, pushed by the representatives of the opposition, provided moral leadership. That the previous regime had already mostly abdicated its will to power is evident in the fact that the old parliament passed most of the “recommendations” of the round table as law without debate, and that the government reported to round table and generally followed its instructions. However, the power of the opposition was based on the ability to mobilize mass demonstrations. This worked only as long as popular sentiment was in line with the aims of the opposition: such as the providing order, organizing free elections; or dissolving the state security apparatus. When interests diverged, this influence declined rapidly. This was particularly visible in the question of independence of the GDR: government and opposition delegates were united in their wish to preserve, at least for some time, an independent GDR, whereas the slogans on the streets soon changed from “We are *the* people” to “We are *one* people”.

At the height of its influence, the ongoing economic and demographic crisis elevated the round table to a form of co-government, which provided invaluable assistance to

preparing the country for the difficult transformation into a democratic state governed by the rule of law and into a market economy. But this influence soon waned. In January, eight members of the opposition joined the government as ministers without portfolio. It seems like they did this out of a sense of responsibility, hoping, among other things, that it would improve the reputation of the GDR leadership particular in its negotiations with the West German government. This hope was misplaced, since the Kohl government did not intend to help the makeshift GDR government in any major way. Kohl had his eyes set firmly on the outcome of the elections. The move weakened the opposition since it blurred the line between government and opposition representatives. Most importantly, once the election date was set, a split arose within the opposition at the round table: a split between “moral” actors which were interested in promoting a particular vision of the public good and the “political” actors which intended to run in the election and therefore had to act and communicate more strategically. The consensus and unity of the early round table two months earlier was gone.

The result of the March elections is [well-known](#): the conservative “Alliance for Germany”, which had run on a platform of quick re-unification with West Germany, gained 48% of votes. The opposition groups represented at the round table failed to clear the 5% threshold needed to enter parliament. The new majority in the parliament did not feel the need for the draft constitution that the Central Round Table has bequeathed to it – quite the opposite: it was feared that adopting a new constitution would be detrimental to reunification, since it would breathe new life into the GDR which, in their view, was bound to wither away soon.

In sum, the influence of the Central Round Table was limited to the period leading up to the first election. Given that its power base and political legitimacy was precarious, it fulfilled its role of controlling the government remarkably well. Reasons for this success was the very specific habitus the members of the opposition which were not interested in gaining positions of power for themselves and the complete disorientation of the regime. Both factors are tied to the very specific historical moment. This severely constrains what we can learn from the Central Round Table for the current predicament of democratic backsliding in East-Central Europe. On the other hand, we can ask what legacy the round table left for the current equivalent of democratic backsliding in Germany: the spectacular rise of the “Alternative for Germany” party (AfD) in East German federal states, which represents not only people with right-wing conservative and illiberal viewpoints but with also clearly politically extremist and authoritarian agendas. And again, the round table has left hardly any footprints in the German collective memory, positively or negatively, at least compared with its Polish or Hungarian siblings. The reasons are clear: the way history proceeded was very much determined by factors which were decided before it even held its first session: once unification was on the table, there was nothing the round table could do to bind the decision of the electorate. The reasons for the growing political dissatisfaction of many in East Germany are complex and beyond the scope of this statement, but it seems clear that the history of the round table, provides no narrative for extremists to exploit. Whether round table formats can be used to overcome the poisonous, and increasingly visible political polarization of German politics remains to be seen.

